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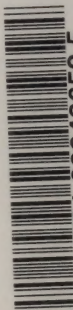
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BOSWELL AS ESSAYIST

In the *Scottish Historical Review* for January, 1921, appears an article by Dr. J. T. T. Brown on *James Boswell as Essayist*. It should, perhaps, rather be called *James Boswell as Craftsman*. The essays in question are the seventy numbers of the series which Boswell published anonymously under the title of *The Hypochondriack*; they were printed in the *London Magazine* from October 1777 to August 1783.¹ Dr. Brown's thesis is laid down in the reserved statement which concludes his paper: "The essays are intimately related to the Biography (the *Life of Johnson*), and were used by Boswell in the preparation of the final text. That is the only proposition I have advanced." As a matter of fact, the author of this suggestive article stands in the position of a lawyer who asks a leading question; it may be over-ruled by the judge, and be stricken from the records, but the desired impression has been made upon the jury, just the same. The impression that we carry away from *James Boswell as Essayist* is not merely that the essays are closely related to the Biography, and were used in the preparation of the final text, but that Boswell had a firm purpose to write the life of Johnson from the time of meeting him, and turned all his activities to that account as a sort of exercise for the great work; and that these essays were the exercise in style.

Dr. Brown begins his paper by a short account of the essays themselves, and by limiting his consideration to an evaluation of them as documents in the "great secret" of Boswell's life. He notes that Boswell had already published his *Tour to Corsica* (1767-68), in which evidence of his methods in gathering material is found, and that the *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, although unpublished, was certainly a feat accomplished, with every indication in Boswell's own words² that he would use it as

¹ They have never been reprinted, and even Boswell's biographers know very little about them. For instance, Mr. Percy Fitzgerald, in his *Life of James Boswell*, mentions *The Hypochondriack* among Boswell's works as a series of papers extending over two years. Mr. Mallory, in his *Boswell the Biographer*, although he shows in his text a clearer knowledge of the essays than Mr. Fitzgerald does, copies the list of works given by Mr. Fitzgerald without correction or comment.

² In a letter to his friend Temple, 1775.

material for the Biography if he could not print it during Johnson's lifetime.

In 1777 Boswell was unable to associate with Johnson as freely as he had been used to do. Without any opportunity to pursue his collection of material, he may have turned to the writing of these essays as a means of clearing his mind on topics which he knew he would be treating in the *Life*, and polishing his style, as well as occupying his time until he should resume his former activities with Johnson himself. Dr. Brown quotes the introductory essay on this point:

"(Periodical essays) fill up the interstices in (men's) lives, and occupy moments which would otherwise be lost. To other men who have not yet attained to any considerable degree of constancy in application, the writing of periodical essays may serve to strengthen their faculties and prepare them for the execution of more important works."

Dr. Brown believes that the essays were written "mainly with the object of clarifying his mind on points discussed between him and Johnson during the fourteen years of their acquaintance, and were in great part derived from and suggested by the Journals and notebooks containing the memoranda of these discussions." He gives a selection of carefully chosen parallel passages from the essays and the *Life*, which seem to show that Boswell turned to these papers in the preparation of his final text for the great biography; that frequently he tries one style in the essays, which is made better or clearer by other methods in the *Life*; that he seems in the essays to be trying to recapture the exact terms of some conversation or discussion before it shall slip from him; that he was sounding his own sturdy standards in his mind, testing and re-assuring himself in this communion with ink and paper, on subjects in which he and the Doctor did not think alike.

The last point made by Dr. Brown is that the excuse given for ending the series in 1783 is a thin one. Boswell stops ostensibly because he has reached the seventieth essay, and does not wish to continue until he becomes a bore to his readers. As a matter of fact, says Dr. Brown, "there were other and better reasons not needing then to be publicly divulged. (Boswell's) succession to the family estates in August 1782 . . . had brought new cares and new employments which were pressing heavily upon him. That was one reason: another and weightier

one was the sudden and serious illness of Dr. Johnson, whose paralytic seizure in June exactly synchronises with the dispatch to the printer of the seventieth essay, which appeared in the July number of the *London Magazine*. The essays were tentative and preparatory for the greater task that now seemed at hand. They had served their purpose and been useful more than once in furnishing topics for conversation during the most fruitful period of his intimacy with Johnson, the years 1777-1783. What perhaps is most remarkable to a twentieth century reader is, that nearly every subject discussed in them is brought under review in the Biography during these six years; giving the impression that the Biographer had proposed the themes and incited Johnson to talk on them."

The very reserve with which Dr. Brown makes his cautious points has a convincing effect. I think that there can be no quarrel with his declared intention of showing that relations existed between the Hypochondriack essays and the *Life*; my only objection would be to the interpretation of those relations. We have too much a tendency to wipe out Boswell as an individual, and set up a recording machine of Johnson in his place. However we admit that Boswell conceived the idea of the Biography very soon after meeting Johnson,³ and that he very early developed his method of taking down notes on the talk of great men and of arguing insincerely in order to bring them out, we can in no wise, at least with the material we now have at hand, conclude that there was a firm thread of united purpose throughout everything that Boswell did. (That in itself is not characteristic!) He began his diary writing under the influence of Mr. Love, in 1758, before he knew Johnson; he took notes on the conversation of Voltaire "when I was with him at his chateau at Ferney"; he used his tablets upon the horror-struck Paoli, asked personal questions, and talked like a libertine in order to

³ Boswell had "for several years read his works with delight and instruction, and had the highest reverence for their authour," before meeting Johnson, in 1763; but he speaks also of *recollecting* the first conversations, and we have Malone's word for it that Boswell did not seek Johnson with the idea of "writing him up." Boswell's first letters after meeting Johnson show him to be merely the happy disciple basking in wisdom and goodness. It is not until March 31, 1772, that he asks Johnson for data on his early days. His successful book on Corsica, filled with his hero Paoli, had been published in 1768.

set the Corsican hero off upon his wholesome philosophy; and in Corsica, "from my first setting out on this tour, I wrote down every night what I had observed during the day, throwing together a great deal, that I might afterward make a selection at leisure." These are methods which he later employed upon Johnson, but we cannot say that they were first used as exercises to that end alone. Boswell was content to shine as *Corsica* or *Paoli* Boswell for years after his first success. It is necessary to remember too, that he planned a long list of works beside the great *Life*; his authenticity, his instances, his exercises in style, could also be employed in the service of *A History of James IV of Scotland*, *A Life of Thomas Ruddiman*, *A Life of Sir Robert Sibbald*, *A History of Sweden*, *A History of the Civil War in Great Britain*, an account of his own *Travels*, or any other of his numerous projected⁴ works.

Moreover, in the large number of parallels which I have collected—parallels which show the essays to be a delightful cento of Boswell's recollections of all sorts—we find represented, not only Johnson and his circle, but Voltaire, Rousseau (anathema to Johnson!), a number of anonymous Scots (also anathema), and what I consider as chiefly important, many good bits from Boswell himself.

Boswell seems to have been particularly fond of repeating Voltaire's evasion on the subject of ideas. In the essay on Memory (*LXVII of the series*) he says,

I had the honour to have a conversation with *Voltaire* on the subject. I asked him, if he could give me any notion of the situation of our ideas which we have totally forgotten at the time, yet shall afterwards recollect. He paused, meditated a little, and acknowledged his ignorance in the spirit of a philosophical poet, by repeating as a very happy allusion a passage in Thomson's *Seasons*—Aye, said he, 'Where sleep the winds when it is calm?'

In the much earlier paper on Conscience (*VII of the series*) he makes a distinct reference to this conversation, though through the medium of a very different quotation:

The construction of the human mind is a mystery which there seems to be no probability will ever be known in this state of human existence. Of its operation we have many registers, as we have many meteorological journals. But of itself we know no more than of the original substance of the planets. He, 'who spake as never man spake,' saith of one well-known quality in the

⁴ For the list, see George Birkbeck Hill's volume v of the *Life*, 103 note 2.

natural world, 'The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof; but cannot tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth.' The sound of the mind we hear; but what it is we cannot tell.

If Boswell was writing the essays with one eye upon Johnson, it is strange that he should refer so often to Rousseau, whom the sage characterized as "a man who talks nonsense so well (that he) must know he is talking nonsense." It is true that the Scot joined the Englishman in laughing at the Frenchman's exaltation of simplicity as the only means of happiness; but aside from the numerous references to that part of Rousseau's philosophy, always made in a joking tone (in numbers X, XIX, and—at some length—XX), the essays show the influence of his *Nouvelle Héloïse*, and give evidence of Boswell's having read *Émile*, the *Letter to D'Alembert*, and other works. In number III, Boswell refers to the plan for a thousand years of peace, as sketched by the Abbé de St. Pierre, and developed by Rousseau, and asks the un-Boswellian question,—what does war do for the masses? In number VII he speaks of the necessity of proportioning one's performances to one's capabilities, and proceeds,

For I take happiness to be a science fairly worth the seven, . . . and we know the French are of this opinion, for they have a very good phrase for the art of being happy, *savoir vivre*.

This was not the common meaning of *savoir vivre*, which had then, as now, much more the flavor of sophistication about it. An explanation of this passage may be found by turning to the *Nouvelle Héloïse*, v. ii, where, after speaking of the happiness which is attained in the Wolmar household by proportioning the activities to the possibilities inherent in the little society, Rousseau says,

S'il falloit dire avec précision ce qu'on fait dans cette maison pour être heureux, je croirois avoir bien répondu en disant: 'On y sait vivre'; non dans le sens qu'on donne en France à ce mot, qui est d'avoir avec autrui certaines manières établies par la mode: mais de la vie de l'homme et pour laquelle il est né: de cette vie . . . qui dure au delà d'elle-même, et qu'on ne tient pas pour perdue au jour de la mort.

In number VII, Boswell concludes that if conscience were our only director, there would be less vice, and less of that weak, and often vicious compliance, by which men of gaiety do what is ridiculous and criminal, not only against their knowledge, but against their own inclination.

The letter from St. Preux to Julie (*Nouvelle Héloïse*, ii.xxvi) is the story of his debauch in the city, against his better judgment and his will; Julie's answer is but an extended sermon on the text here laid down by Boswell.

The essay on Suicide (*LI of the series*) contains two references to the suicide letters in the *Nouvelle Héloïse* (iii.xxi and xxii), one a direct quotation of some three or four lines. Both of these are acknowledged, but there are also two unacknowledged parallels, which had doubtless remained in Boswell's mind without his remembering their source; he says of the morality of suicide,

It is remarkable, that in the law delivered by divine legation to the Jews, though it be abundantly full and minute in specifying crimes and circumstances of prohibition, there is no mention of Suicide; but in the Jewish history, as recorded in the Old Testament, we find that Saul, their unfortunate king, fell upon his sword in Mount Gilboa; nor is it mentioned as a thing strange or shocking.

And St. Preux writes to Bomston,

En effet, où verra-t-on dans la Bible entière une loi contre le suicide, ou même une simple improbation? et n'est-il pas bien étrange que dans les exemples de gens qui se sont donné la mort, on n'y trouve pas un seul mot de blâme contre aucun de ces exemples! Il y a plus; celui de Samson est autorisé par un prodige qui le venge de ses ennemis."

Near the end of his essay, Boswell observes,

Every melancholy man who has groaned under the temptation to destroy himself, has afterwards had such enjoyments as to make him fully sensible that he would have acted very absurdly had he cut himself off from this 'pleasing anxious being,' from a persuasion that all that remained of it would be sadness.

And Bomston answers to St. Preux,

Tu t'ennuies de vivre, et tu dis: La vie est un mal. Tôt ou tard tu sera consolé, et tu diras; La vie est un bien."

Of the parallels to his *Boswelliana*, (that delightful "collection of good things" which is evidently the only notebook now preserved, out of an original store of many), the most striking likenesses are found in anecdotes used as instances to prove a point. In XXII he says,

I remember a friend of mine applied to a barrister of great practice who was gathering money, what Horace says of the ant—'*Ore trahit quodcumque potest atque addit a cervo*—gets with its mouth what it can and adds to the heap.' I marked this down in my collection of good things.

The collection of good things has it thus:

Mr. William Nairne observed that it may be said of a well-employed barrister who lays by much money, what Horace says of the *ant*,—‘*Ore trahit quodcunque potest atque addit cervo.*’

The story of the Scotch Highlander who censured his companion for the luxury of a stone beneath his head at night; a contrast in the measure of drinking among northern and among southern nations; the comparison of an author who gives false praise to the work of an unknown man, to an assayer certifying base metal to be gold,—and a number of other stories and happy thoughts are found both in the *Boswelliana* and in the essays. Of them all, the best is one on Boswell himself, carefully disguised in the essays. In *Boswelliana* there occurs the naïve confession,

I can more easily part with a good sum at once than with a number of small sums—with a hundred guineas rather than with two guineas at fifty different times; as one has less pain from having a tooth drawn whole than when it breaks and is pulled out in pieces.’

Number LVII of the essays, on Wealth, gives the same idea in an altered version:

It has occurred to me, that if a saving man is obliged to part with money, it is easier for him to part with a large sum all at once than with many small sums at intervals. There is but one pain in the first case; whereas in the second, he is, as it were, torn piece-meal. It is easier to have a tooth pulled out entire than that it should break in the operation, and be drawn in ragged fragments, and sharp splinters.

It is to be remembered that in the *Life* (Hill’s edition iv.220), Boswell admits his being “occasionally troubled with a fit of narrowness.” In number LVI of the essays, he writes with vigor,

Some men have alternate fits of narrowness and prodigality, and they, like all other inconsistent characters, can neither be easy in themselves, or esteemed by others. And many who have a strong passion for saving, are from a false shame, or cowardly dread of the world, perpetually endeavouring to disguise it. They are still more uneasy and uncomfortable.

His other faults of talkativeness and carelessness are censured in the same way, parallels occurring between the figure of Limbertongue in *Boswelliana*, and Boswell’s description of himself in the *Tour to the Hebrides*, and essay number

XXIII, on Reserve. The indolence which beset him continually is set forth feelingly in essay number VI, which is largely a development of the ideas in one of Boswell's letters to Garrick, dated April 11, 1774:

That I have not thanked you for (your letter) long ere now, is one of those strange facts for which it is so difficult to account, that I shall not attempt it. The Idler has strongly expressed many of the wonderful effects of the *vis inertiae* of the human mind. But it is hardly credible that a man should have the warmest regard for his friend, a constant desire to show it, and a keen ambition for a frequent epistolary intercourse with him, and yet should let months roll on without having resolution, or activity, or power, or whatever it be, to write a few lines. A man in such a situation is somewhat like Tantalus reversed.

He recedes, he knows not how, from what he loves, which is full as provoking as when what he loves recedes from him. That my complaint is not a peculiar fancy, but deep in human nature, I appeal to the authority of St. Paul, who, though he had not been exalted to the dignity of an apostle, would have stood high in fame as a philosopher and orator, 'What I would, that do I not!'

The essay reads,

Hypochondria sometimes brings on such an extreme degree of languor, that the patient has a reluctance to every species of exertion. The uneasiness occasioned by this state, is owing to a vivacity of imagination, presenting at the same time, ideas of activity; so that a comparison is made between what is, and what should be. . . . To be therefore overpowered with languor, must make a man very unhappy; he is tantalized with a thousand ineffectual wishes which he cannot realize. For as Tantalus is fabled to have been tormented by the objects of his desire being ever in his near view, yet ever receding from his touch as he endeavoured to approach them, the languid Hypochondriack has the sad mortification of being disappointed of realizing any wish by the wretched defect of his own activity. While in that situation, time passes over him only to be loaded with regrets. The important duties of life, the benevolent offices of friendship are neglected, though he is sensible that he shall upbraid himself for that neglect till he is glad to take shelter under the cover of disease. . . . To pay a visit, or write a letter to a friend, does not surely require much activity; yet such small exertions have appeared so laborious to an Hypochondriack, that he has delayed from hour to hour, till friendship has grown cold for want of having its heat continued.

Another letter to Garrick, lamenting the death of Goldsmith in 1774, forms the basis for a fine passage in essay number XVI.⁵

The parallels to the *Life of Johnson* undoubtedly outnumber those from any other single source, but exact parallels are very rarely the sayings of Johnson himself, or phrases about situations in which Boswell and Johnson disagreed. In fact, two of

⁵ See *Garrick Correspondence*.

the precise parallels which Dr. Brown instances to prove his point are not, strictly speaking, parallels between the essays and the *Life*, but more of Boswell's repetitions of himself. In number XXVIII he quotes Lord Lyttelton on Thomson—"he loathed much to write"; in number LXX he uses a figure about beautiful flowers springing upon a dunghill. Both of these appear in the *Life*, it is true,⁶—but both times in letters *from Boswell* to Johnson, inserted complete in the biography. What really seems to be represented most is the Johnsonian attitude toward life; for instance, the whole of number XIX, on Government, can be traced through the many conversations on subordination, in 1772, 1773, and 1778; and number VIII, on Luxury, has the familiar ring. All of this may have been culled from the notebooks, no doubt; but the expression is that of the edified disciple nodding a general assent to the opinions of the master, not that of the stylist trying his hand at artistic reproduction of the master's pronouncements. A very strange thing is that in the essays Johnson appears under his own name but half a dozen times, all of them references to his famous works. Otherwise—some eleven times—his informal sayings, or his opinions, appear as those of "an old friend of mine,"—"an extraordinary man, by whom all should be willing to be instructed,"—"a great observer of mankind," and so on. We should expect more than this. The more I consider the proportion of parallel passages, the more I become convinced that Boswell's whole interest in these essays is Boswell, not Johnson.

I agree with Dr. Brown that Boswell closed the series with singular abruptness, and that his excuse for it was thin. I cannot, however, accept Dr. Brown's surmises on the subject. It is true that new cares, coming with Boswell's accession to the estate, had probably made the essays difficult to prepare on time, and it is possible that Boswell was so sincerely worried about Johnson's health that he could not fix his mind on the note-books of their conversation without a pang. I am certain that he did not conclude *The Hypochondriack* because the writing of the *Life* seemed imminent. Boswell was yet to be active in the effort to send the old philosopher to Italy. Moreover, Dr. Brown errs in saying that Dr. Johnson's paralytic

⁶ George Birbeck Hill's volume iii, pages 133 and 409.

seizure in June "exactly synchronizes with the dispatch to the printer of the seventieth essay, which appeared in the July number of the *London Magazine*." There was no essay by Boswell at all in the July number. Essay LXIX came out in June, with no hint of any intention to cease publication; the last essay, number LXX, appeared in the August issue, long after the worry about Johnson's life was over.⁷ My explanation may seem the serious consideration of what was really mere chance, but I offer it for what it may be worth. The simple fact was, that the *London Magazine* had either gone into new hands altogether, or else the editorial staff was reformed for some unknown motive. At any rate, the half-year January to June, 1783, was bound by itself, and the volume containing the months from July to December was labelled *The London Magazine Improved*. The June number was preceded by an announcement that the magazine would be "printed on a new type, and conducted on an enlarged and improved plan." Further, the proprietors "wish it to be known, that they have engaged writers of ability, who have never been employed in the conduct of their former Magazine, to superintend these new departments, and to execute these improved plans, ably and vigorously." This announcement arouses no excitement, because we know that Boswell had been one of the proprietors of the *London Magazine* at least since 1771.⁸ The surprise is the complete absence of *The Hypochondriack* from the July number, and the cool note above the final essay in the August issue:

We are sorry to inform the public, that the ingenious correspondent, who has so long engaged the attention of our readers in THE HYPOCHONDRIACK, has closed his design in the following paper. But though we are no longer to be favored with his communications under this title, we hope that we shall not be altogether deprived of his correspondence.

If Boswell was still one of the proprietors, this was strange language, and in a strange tone. Is it my imagination, or are the following passages in the last of the essays, the reflection of the internal upheaval in the *London Magazine*?

To retire in proper time from any state of exertion is one of the most nice and difficult trials of human prudence and resolution. Every man of any classi-

⁷ Johnson made a trip to Rochester in late July.

⁸ See his letter to Garrick dated 18th Sept. 1771, in which he speaks of the *London Magazine*, "in which I have some concern."

cal education recollects the well known allusion to a horse growing aged, who ought no longer to be pushed in the race lest he should be left behind breathless and contemptible. But the misfortune is, that self-love deceives us exceedingly in the estimation of our mental abilities, so that we cannot be easily persuaded that they are in any degree decayed. . . . I can truly say in the words of Pope,

‘I love to pour out all myself as plain

As downright Shippen, or as old Montaigne.’

Perhaps, indeed, I have poured out myself with more freedom than prudence will approve, and I am aware of being too much an egotist. But I trust that my readers will be generous enough not to take advantage of my openness and confidence, but rather treat me with a liberal indulgence.

Yet let it not be understood that I supplicate favour with an abject timidity. For I am not afraid of a fair trial by impartial judges. This comfort I have, that my intentions have all along been good, and that I cannot be condemned for having failed in my undertaking; because I undertook nothing determinate, but only to give a series of essays, which I have accordingly done.

That silent month of July may indicate struggle with the new editors, chagrin, proud retreat before a resignation was asked,—or simply a pressure of affairs at home so great that the break in the essay series was seen to be inevitable,—simple coincidence. But I think that if anything my coincidence is a little more certain and a little more striking, than that of Dr. Brown.

There can be no quarrel with the statement that these essays were employed by Boswell in the preparation of his final text of the *Life*. Again and again bits from the essays appear in it, now as actual parts of the text, in anecdotes or sayings, and now as explanatory or merely ornamental notes. Dr. Brown, however, sees Boswell writing the essays and looking forward directly to the *Life*; I see him beginning the *Life* as a completely new and distinct piece of work, but turning back occasionally to the already finished essays for phrasing or an instance in point. It is natural that a man of Boswell’s disposition should, in preparing his masterpiece, revert to compositions in which he took a certain pride, in order to cull choice bits. The *Life* was a gigantic production, which, on Boswell’s own testimony, often found him sad, tired, and discouraged. There is scarcely a person in that situation who would not turn for encouragement to some former evidence of his best faculties, to cheer and re-assure himself. Boswell did think well of *The Hypochondriack*,—he told his friend Temple that he “really thought that it went wonderfully well.”

However they were written, and for whatever purpose, they still go wonderfully well; they are the essence of Boswell and a delightful commentary on his century, and all good Johnsonians or Boswellians owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Brown for calling attention to these ingenuous and charming pages.

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